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The Reliability of Poland's Armed Forces

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National Intelligence Council
Memorandum

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The Reliability of Poland's Armed Forces (U)

National Intelligence Council
Memorandum

Information available as of 1 October 1981 was used in the preparation of this report.

This Memorandum was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces. It was written by [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] the Current Support Division, Office of 25X1
Soviet Analysis, and coordinated within the National Intelligence Council. Comments may be addressed to the NIO/GPF [redacted] 25X1

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The Reliability of Poland's Armed Forces

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Summary

The Soviets must doubt the military reliability of Polish forces within the Warsaw Pact because of the past year's crisis. There has been an upsurge of nationalism and resentment of the USSR in the armed forces as well as in the society at large. Also the Polish party and government have suffered a loss of power which probably reduces their ability to call the nation to arms.

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The reliability of Poland's armed forces to the USSR is likely to depend greatly on circumstances. In an unambiguous NATO threat to Poland, the Soviets would have little doubt that Polish forces would follow them to war. In more ambiguous situations, the Soviets would doubt Poland's military reliability. But Soviet control of the Warsaw Pact's command machinery and the timing of the Pact's preparations for war could impart a momentum to the readying of Polish forces that would be difficult to halt. Also, NATO's readying of its forces might alarm the Poles and increase their susceptibility to Soviet pressure.

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A Soviet invasion of Poland would greatly reduce, if not eliminate, for at least several years the prospects for significant Polish military support for the USSR in a war against NATO. If the Soviets do not invade and a more liberal and stable Polish regime emerges, its greater legitimacy in the eyes of the people might make it more capable of mobilizing its society. Nevertheless, its ability to deliver Poland's military support probably would depend on a national perception of a NATO threat.

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Because Poland's role in Warsaw Pact plans for war is critical, the Soviets probably would not initiate a war in Central Europe unless assured of Polish participation and support. In the absence of a clear NATO threat, the Soviets would need time to condition Polish perceptions and orchestrate military preparations so that Polish forces would be readied before the outbreak of fighting. Thus, the chances for strategic surprise would be substantially reduced.

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Lessened Polish military reliability also makes it important for NATO to direct diplomacy and propaganda at the Poles in an East-West crisis. If the Poles are convinced that NATO wishes to avoid hostilities, the Soviets will be uncertain of Polish military support.

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The Reliability of Poland's Armed Forces (U)

Background

The [redacted] concludes that Moscow would depend greatly on the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact (NSWP) armed forces in a war with NATO. It also identifies the reliability of these forces as a major uncertainty for Soviet military planners—"the perennial issue made more pressing by recent developments in Poland." This paper examines Polish military reliability in greater detail. [redacted]

Poland's Military Role

Poland, with the largest NSWP armed force, has been assigned a vital role in Soviet plans for war against NATO. In a war in Central Europe, the Soviets evidently plan to begin offensive operations with Warsaw Pact forces deployed in three fronts (army groups). The Poles are to form and command the northernmost front, providing about one-fourth of the ground forces divisions committed to the initial offensive and enabling the Soviets to concentrate their own forces stationed in Poland and East Germany in the critical central front. (See map.) [redacted]

In addition, the Poles are responsible for operating and protecting Soviet lines of communication across Poland. The Soviets apparently believe that reinforcements from the western USSR probably would be essential for a successful Pact campaign against NATO. Poland, which lies astride the routes that these reinforcements would use, is tasked with supporting and securing their wartime movement.

[redacted]

Poland's Military Significance

This combination of major wartime assignments makes Poland critical within the Warsaw Pact. If Polish forces refused or were unable to fulfill their offensive combat role, the Soviets would have to substitute their own troops. This would reduce the number of Soviet reinforcements available or require the diversion of forces from other fronts. Also, if the Soviets assumed responsibility for the northern fr 25X1
protection of their lines of communication throug 25X1
Poland would become even more important. Allocating forces to assignments within Poland would further reduce Soviet military manpower reserves and require major changes in Soviet plans for military operations.

[redacted] 25X1

In all but the most urgent circumstances, therefo 25X1
the Soviets probably would not initiate a war in Europe unless assured of Poland's active support. An organized Polish military resistance to a Warsaw Pact offensive against NATO could completely disrupt Soviet plans. [redacted] 25X1

Poland's Military Reliability Before July 1980

Before the outbreak of labor unrest in July 1980, the Soviets probably believed that Poland would be a reliable ally in a war against NATO, particularly against West Germany. The Poles shared Russian hostility toward—and fear of—the Germans. To a great extent Polish political and military leaders 25X1
their positions to Soviet patronage. Although not blind followers of Moscow, they accepted the obligations for coalition warfare, expanded and modernized their armed forces, and exercised them alongside Soviet troops. [redacted] 25X1

Moreover, we believe that the Soviets have established a mechanism for the wartime command of Warsaw Pact forces in Central Europe that could strengthen their own control of NSWP forces at the expens 25X1
the NSWP national authorities. Soviet dominated theater-level commands apparently have been established, which would be activated in wartime to serve as intermediaries between the USSR's General Staff and Polish and other front-level forces in the field. We believe that the consent of the NSWP national political authorities would be required to activate the theater commands. Once activated, however, the theater commands would allow the Soviets to issue o 25X1

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Warsaw Pact Fronts

The Warsaw Pact envisions a basic force of three fronts (army groups), including 50 to 60 ground divisions plus support and tactical air units, as the first echelon of an attack on NATO. Second echelon fronts would be formed from forces in the westernmost military districts of the USSR.

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to the operational forces of their Pact allies without first going through the national ministries of defense and general staffs, which might be more inclined to stall or obstruct them in response to domestic political pressures.

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Even in peacetime the theater-level commands may help alleviate Soviet concerns regarding NSWP military reliability. In addition to reducing the time required to prepare Pact forces for war, the peacetime rehearsal of these commands can accustom the Poles and Moscow's other allies to following Soviet orders.

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Even before 1980, other factors prompted Soviet mistrust: Poland's historical ties to the West, intense nationalism, and strong anti-Russian sentiments. These attitudes probably were shared by the conscripts who made up the bulk of Poland's armed forces and by segments of the officer corps. In addition, the riots of 1970 and 1976 indicated that the Polish party and government leadership could not compel public support for unpopular decisions and called into question their ability to deliver Poland's military support in a confrontation with NATO.

The Impact of the Past Year's Crisis

The crisis that began in July 1980 has heightened the longstanding Soviet uncertainties regarding Poland's military reliability. Poland's crisis has resulted in a resurgence of nationalism, an accompanying resentment of the USSR, and a further weakening of the Polish party and government.

The Resurgence of Nationalism. Solidarity's ascendance has been accompanied by a resurgence of nationalism which the Soviets apparently believe has affected Poland's armed forces as well as the society at large. In December 1980, Vadim Zagladin, First Deputy Chief of the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU that the Soviets were especially concerned over nationalist feelings within the Polish military. It was unclear whether Zagladin's remarks referred to the entire Polish armed forces or just to Polish conscripts. But at about the same time, high-ranking functionaries of the Soviet party that they distrusted the Polish officer corps.

Resentment of the USSR. The threat of Soviet military intervention in Poland's affairs during the past year apparently has reinforced the anti-Russian sentiments of the Polish people and heightened the Soviets' concern over Polish resentment friction with Polish civilians since the start of the crisis, although there have been no reports of confrontations between Soviet and Polish military personnel. For the Polish armed forces, however, the possibility of Soviet military intervention probably has been a concern since the start of the crisis. Reportedly, many Polish soldiers share the civilians' anti-Soviet views.

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The Weakening of the Party and Government. The upsurge of nationalism and resentment of the USSR have coincided with a drastic weakening of the Polish party and government, the elements on which the Soviets would depend to deliver Poland's military support in a crisis with NATO. The Soviets are certainly mindful of this. Moscow may believe, moreover, that the weakness of the party and government could affect their control of the Polish armed forces. The normal conscription-release cycle has brought numerous Solidarity members and supporters into the armed forces and several sources report that even within the officer corps there is considerable sympathy for the union. Solidarity, however, has not contested the regime's control of the armed forces and probably will continue to avoid direct challenges to Soviet security interests. Further, no influential group in Poland has questioned Poland's obligations to the Pact or challenged the legitimacy of the military establishment and its ties with the USSR.

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Soviet Confidence in Polish Leaders

Although concerned by the Polish regime's loss of power, the Soviets probably remain confident in the commitment of top Polish political and military leaders to the Warsaw Pact. Poland's key party, government, and armed forces leaders have cooperated with the Soviets throughout their careers. During the past year's crisis, many of these leaders have stated publicly that a firm alliance with the USSR is the only guarantee of Poland's security. The Soviets have been critical of the Polish leadership and at times have expressed support for its hardline critics. But Soviet criticism of Poland's leaders has focused on their inability or reluctance to deal more firmly with domestic unrest, not on their foreign or military policies. Poland's leaders apparently are still being included in Pact military planning; the Poles continue to participate in Pact military exercises; and Moscow continues to provide them with weapons and military equipment.

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The Influence of Issues and Circumstances

The reliability of Poland's armed forces to the USSR in a confrontation with NATO will continue to depend greatly on the issues over which the prospect of war arises and the circumstances in which fighting begins. A NATO attack on the Pact, for example, almost certainly would rally the Poles to the Soviets' side, while a Soviet call for an unprovoked attack on NATO would be much less likely to evoke Polish support.

Such extreme scenarios, however, are unlikely. A more realistic scenario would involve an international crisis or period of tension that did not entail an unambiguous threat to Poland's national interests. In such a situation, Polish military support for the Soviets would be doubtful.

If the Soviets Invade

A Soviet invasion of Poland would greatly reduce, if not eliminate, for at least several years the prospects for significant Polish military support of the USSR in any war against NATO. The Polish reform movement of the past year has been more broadly based than the Czechoslovak reformism of 1968. Soviet intervention would arouse massive antagonism and possibly some direct resistance by the armed forces and civilians.

In the aftermath of a Soviet invasion, Poland's military capabilities would decrease significantly. If the Polish military resisted the Soviets, the fighting probably would devastate the Polish forces involved. Even if the Polish armed forces acquiesced, an intervention probably would significantly damage their morale and popular support. As in Czechoslovakia after 1968, a Soviet invasion probably would cause massive resignations from the armed forces and continuing problems in recruiting qualified officers. The rebuilding process probably would take many years.

If the Soviets Do Not Invade. If the Soviets do not invade, changes in Poland's military reliability are likely to depend more on the evolution of Polish internal events. Were Polish politics to return to pre-1980 conditions, the chances for Polish military support to the Soviets probably would increase. But, at present, such an evolution seems extremely unlikely.

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Poland more likely will continue along the path of political liberalization, perhaps edging toward greater internal instability. Further loss of political control probably would cause Poland's military reliability to its Soviet ally to decline even more than it has, but intervention by Moscow would also become more likely. If a more liberal and stable Polish regime emerges, it might enjoy greater legitimacy in the eyes of the people and be more capable of mobilizing the country. Nevertheless, its ability to deliver significant military support against NATO probably would depend on a national perception of a NATO threat.

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A Crisis Scenario

A NATO–Warsaw Pact crisis could develop from an East-West confrontation in some other region of the world. For example, if the Soviets invaded Iran or appeared to threaten the Persian Gulf oil trade, we could have a Soviet-US confrontation that would heighten tensions around the world—but particularly in Western Europe. Both NATO and the Pact might wish to avoid a wider conflict, but there would be pressures on both sides to take military precautions.

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At some point in the crisis, the Soviets would require the explicit agreement of the Polish national leadership to proceed with their plans for the Polish forces. Yet, Soviet control over the Warsaw Pact's command machinery and the timing of the Pact's preparations and NATO's responses during the crisis could create conditions in which the Poles would be swept along by the move toward war. Even those Poles who wished to stand aside might cooperate with Soviet plans at an early stage if it were unclear whether the Soviets had already decided to go to war. A readying of NATO forces in response to the crisis could cause the Poles to feel more threatened and persuade them to make additional preparations. If the Pact's wartime com-

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mand mechanism could be activated and Polish forces brought to a high stage of readiness, the momentum toward war could prove difficult to halt.

If the Poles were maneuvered into a war that they did not support, they could be an unenthusiastic and ineffective fighting force, especially if the Soviets and their other Pact allies did not enjoy early battlefield success. Indications that Pact forces would be victorious or Polish outrage at damage by NATO forces, however, could motivate the Poles to overcome their reluctance and fight to their utmost.

Conclusion

Poland's military reliability to the USSR in a confrontation with NATO probably has been reduced by the past year's crisis. To the extent that the chances of effective Polish military support for the Soviets can be assessed apart from a consideration of specific conflict scenarios, these chances are probably low at present and are likely to remain so for the next few years. There are, however, no immediate indications that the Soviets are revising Pact plans for war against NATO because of events in Poland.

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Because Poland's role in Warsaw Pact plans for war is critical, the Soviets probably would not initiate war in Central Europe unless assured of Poland's participation and support. But to have such assurance either the Poles would have to perceive a clear NATO threat or the Soviets would have to convince the Poles of such a threat—a process that probably would require considerable time. In either case the chances of strategic surprise would be reduced substantially

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Implications for NATO

The continuation of Poland's crisis increases the likelihood of changes in Soviet contingency plans for war in Europe. NATO, therefore, should be especially watchful for signs of change in Warsaw Pact military exercises and evidence of efforts to increase the capability of Soviet or other Pact forces to assume combat or logistic support assignments now entrusted to the Poles. Increases in the number of Soviet military advisers in Poland or adjustments in military goods and services provided would also indicate change in Soviet confidence in Poland's military reliability.

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Lessened Polish reliability reduces the likelihood of a surprise attack in Europe and increases the importance of NATO diplomacy and propaganda directed at the Poles in some crisis. If the Poles are convinced that NATO wishes to avoid hostilities, the Soviets will remain uncertain of Polish military support

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